

# When Professors Stifle Freedom of Thought

Duke theology professor Paul Griffiths created a firestorm recently by [criticizing](#) time-consuming racial equity meetings that, in his view, detracted from research, teaching, and study:

*It'll be, I predict with confidence, intellectually flaccid: there'll be bromides, clichés, and amen-corner rah-rahs in plenty. When (if) it gets beyond that, its illiberal roots and totalitarian tendencies will show.*

He was promptly accused, in response, of “racism, sexism, and other forms of bigotry.” Yet in the entire correspondence, which he recently published, he says nothing that could reasonably be construed that way. It also came out that he had been subject to a kangaroo court for months over his objections to the meetings. Dr Griffiths [resigned yesterday](#). A recent graduate [wrote in response](#) to the news:

*In a discussion about the racist incidents with some other Div School students, I said that perhaps the way we were responding to the incidents was hurting rather than helping, because after every incident the black students would make public announcements about how hurt and afraid and rejected they felt, and then everyone would hatch plans to re-educate the whole university on issues of racism. I suggested that instead perhaps we should respond to the perpetrators like we would a bully, with strength and confidence and even defiance, to show them they didn't have power over anyone. You would have thought I had suggested we start a chapter of the KKK. They made it clear I was a horrible person in denial of the harsh realities of racism for suggesting such a thing, and I learned to keep my mouth shut.*

This is a clear example but not the only one. Rule by authoritarian mobs with a vested interest in promoting intergroup conflict is morphing into our future as a society.

Meanwhile, academics are popping up everywhere to advance ideas [like those of](#) Australian philosopher Robert Simpson: "However, once we extrapolate beyond the clear-cut cases, the question of what counts as free speech gets rather tricky," so "I'd propose a third way: put free 'speech' as such to one side, and replace it with a series of more narrowly targeted expressive liberties." He cites Canada as a good example but Canada has just enacted a law against Islamophobia, a law whose implications are engendering increasing alarm. Dr Simpson's article is a sound reason to believe that we should stick to opting for free speech in all but the most "clear-cut cases."

[Last week](#), we looked at some ways in which the war on freedom is rotting our intellectual life: In a world governed by naturalism, power is its own justification and it need not be exercised in a rational way. Many of the controversies and contentions that surround us are easier to sort out if we keep that in mind. For example, let's revisit some earlier themes, to see the shape of what's to come in more detail:

*Facts have no privileged position in the world that struggles to be born.* And the results can harm the most vulnerable people. Heather Mac Donald, author of [The War on Cops](#), was recently [subjected to abuse at](#) Claremont College ("fleeing the university under the protection of campus security"), on the false grounds that she is a racist.

As public affairs analyst Douglas Murray puts it, the students quite freely "make claims about people that are lies, yet state them as though they are categorical truths. And then they declare that 'truth' is a 'construct' – and one that they do not believe in." Mac Donald's crime was to trace the spike in homicide in the United States in recent years to lack of

enforcement due to concerns about appearing racist. As it happens, facts still matter off-campus. In the real world, poor and otherwise disadvantaged people of all races are [more likely to be victims](#) of violent crime than better off ones are. Meanwhile, students can comfortably insulate themselves in the ivory tower from the consequences of their unquestioned beliefs.

*It makes little difference if useful beliefs are based on obvious untruths.* For example, college women [fear rape](#), based on a 2015 Association of American Universities study which estimated that about one in four had experienced sexual assault or misconduct. But that study grouped social offences with criminal offences. The US Department of Justice offered a figure (2014) of one in 53 college women. That's a much more realistic figure and, in any event, less advantaged women are [significantly more likely](#) to be victims of sexual assault. The myth of omnipresent danger creates anxiety and learned helplessness in college women and distracts attention from those truly at risk.

*There are no fixed standards of justice to appeal to* so hypocrisy is no longer the tribute that vice pays to virtue; it is just the new normal. Take the case of gay provocateur Milo Yiannopoulos, whose scheduled appearance at Berkeley touched off anti-free speech riots. Yiannopoulos suffered a major career setback for [appearing soft](#) on gay sex with minors (he denies it and has supported a [Twitter crackdown](#)).

But some [ideological opponents](#) seek to normalize pedophilia themselves. For example, a key [article disappeared](#) from Salon but ([was saved](#) on a web archive). In world where pedophilia is gradually being [normalized](#) even by British police, the question of whether anyone will suffer much for it is coming to depend on one's standing with campus mobs and their supporters.

Similarly, feminist journal Hypatia attracted a [meltdown](#) of

criticism for publishing an article on “transracialism.” The editors assumed that [it was legitimate](#) to change one’s race if it was legitimate to change one’s sex. But in the Orwellian world of today’s academia, everything is suspect unless it is explicitly encouraged—in which case, anything is possible.

*When the only standard is approved sensitivity, as in the tranracialism controversy above, even moral outrages must be accommodated and accepted.* At Jewish World Review, John Kass [quotes](#) Ayaan Hirsi Ali, herself a victim, on the silence of feminists about female genital mutilation:

*“The left can easily and comfortably condemn the misogyny of white men, but not of men of color, not of Muslims,” Hirsi Ali said. “They are afraid of being shunned. They’re afraid of being put into a basket of deplorables. So they’re silent.*

And sometimes it goes beyond silence. A former UNICEF health specialist calls FGM [gender egalitarian surgery](#), with little risk of social shame. Unlike Hirsi Ali, she is not seen as an apostate from moral relativism.

Phyllis Chesler was disinvited from speaking at the University of Arkansas on [honour killings](#) because, so the argument runs, opposition is a form of racism. You will need to read the explanation of that for yourself. Racism has become a very broad brush indeed.

*The sciences are especially hard hit.* This year’s March for Science offered some sobering revelations for the future of science as identity politics.

One was figurehead Bill Nye. During the aftermath of the March, videos surfaced that won’t likely help his reputation: My Sex Junk and another one in which ice cream cones discover sex. Detractors wondered if he wasn’t now the [“Pee Wee Herman of popular science.”](#) Meanwhile, Nye was also quoted as wanting to [shrink science classrooms](#): “Should

we have policies that penalize people for having extra kids in the developed world?" and also as being open to [jailing](#) skeptics of climate change.

But the key complaint about Nye that made news during the pre-March publicity invoked none of this. It was that he is [too white](#). That makes sense if one assumes that, in terms of influence, identity matters far more than behaviour.

Preeminent science journal *Nature* endorsed the March, suggesting that scientists who object to the antics should [shout louder](#) "about what you think matters more." It's a strange world in which the bar for a scientist is set at shouting louder than a motivated identity group. And Harvard sociologist Andrew Jowett explained in the [Atlantic](#) that explaining science to the public doesn't really work anyway:

"Scientized" political issues generate "particularly sharp controversies precisely because the participants can focus exclusively on questions of scientific validity while obscuring the values and interests that shape their positions." As if both sides in any controversy do not have discernible values and interests that shape their positions.

His subtext is yet another riff on "The public can't make good decisions." We should expect to hear that often now. It would be more helpful to the rest of us if Dr. Jowett would comment on recent trends in which [post-normal](#), ["post-truth,"](#) and [post-fact](#) science have come to seem normal, and objectivity is seen as [sexist](#) or worse.

These protest movements are not 1960s retro; they are a flat-out war on reality, conducted by seasoned veterans with a lot at stake.

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